

If I Were a Woman

During the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the image of woman was used in ways similar to the representations of nature: both were praised and simplified, idealized and exploited, admired and derided. To substantiate this point, one may focus attention on Mikhail Vrubel.¹ This “Russian Cézanne” (as Moscow art historians call him) died in 1910 after spending ten years in a psychiatric institution. At the the end of the 1890s Vrubel created a series of drawings and canvases plotted around Mikhail Lermontov’s poem “The Demon,” the love story between an innocent young beauty, Tamara, and the Evil Spirit. If Vrubel is comparable with Cézanne, then it is only in the context of the “supplementarity principle” laid bare by Derrida in his analysis of Rousseau’s texts. Where in Cézanne’s landscapes “that dangerous [read: demonic] supplement” can be seen as the fragmented nature of modernist vision (or the fragmented character of modernist optics), in Vrubel’s art the “supplementarity principle” acquires an anthropomorphic guise as it manifests itself iconically through the image of the Demon. The Demon’s love, Tamara, is endowed by Vrubel with a role similar to that of Mont Sainte-Victoire in Cézanne’s paintings: both represent Rousseau’s ideal of Nature. However unwillingly, both Vrubel and Cézanne slay the ideal, the former with the Demon’s kisses and the latter with his brush strokes.

After the October Revolution, Russian women were liberated to the degree that they were required to serve not only their husbands, but also the government. Their actual participation in the decision-making process was exaggerated by Soviet propaganda. In the former USSR the representatives of the “weaker sex” dealt with a double patriarchy, first with their spouses and then with the masculine authority of the state. The representation of women in the Soviet mass culture of the 1930s became



6.1

Gustav Klutsis, design for the poster
We Will Build Our Own New World,
ca. 1929.

gradually androgynized. Femininity was ejected from the “Society of the Spectacle” (Soviet-style) as a result of the official media’s efforts to depict women as genderless utopian machines. This can be seen in El Lissitzky’s design for the 1929 “Russian Exhibition” in Zurich, in Gustav Klutis’s ca. 1929 poster *We Will Build Our Own New World* (fig. 6.1), and in Vera Mukhina’s 1937 sculpture *The Worker and the Female Collective Farmer*.

Perhaps it is never too late, especially for those involved in Soviet and Russian studies, to begin scrutinizing issues that the Russians either ignore or view as Western imports. Among these are issues of gender, homosexuality, and feminism. Curiously, the most severe responses to feminism are fermenting among women. Thus, a presentation by Swedish critic Maria Lind at a symposium on contemporary photography at the Central House of the Arts in January 1994 was followed by irate comments from a Moscow colleague. The latter stated that unlike Western feminists who fight for equality with men, “the Russian woman enslaves them with her body.” In her opinion, the West has far less social experience than Russia. The first of these statements is inadequate because a side effect of male dominance in society is to involve women in a competitive, win-lose situation, the masculine nature of which is beyond doubt. Therefore, for a woman to “enslave [man] through her body” means that she must become him—or, in other words, become a phallic woman. As for the second statement, one cannot help recalling both Baudrillard, for whom “socialism [Kremlin-style] is the death of the social,” and the fact that until the early 1990s, the experience of Soviet citizens was communal, not social.

Incidentally, everyone at the symposium was struck by the excessively long skirt, sleeves, and collar height of the person who urged women to “enslave through the body.” At a later date, she was photographed naked with two equally naked males, the Moscow critics Vladimir Sal’nikov and Andrei Kovalev. The photograph appeared in the catalogue of Oleg Kulik’s exhibition at the Marat Gelman Gallery in May 1994 (fig. 6.2). Although the woman’s name was not mentioned, it turned out she was Ludmila Lunina, an art critic. All the individuals in the picture are fairly well fed, so the problem of “bodily aggression” can be read (in this visual context) as something entirely real. Moreover, a closer look reveals that “enslavement through the body” is the prerogative of the masculine, not the feminine “principle.” Lunina is crouching and supporting, caryatid-like, the genitals of the atlantes towering over her—thus demonstrating the inadequacy of her thesis.

Until the mid-1990s, feminist intellectual praxis was not welcomed by Moscow’s alternative artists. In 1987, Natalia Nesterova and several other Muscovite women artists ardently denied any attempt by critics, colleagues, or the public to view their artistic oeuvre within the framework



6.2
Anonymous, *Untitled*, 1994.

of a feminist agenda. One can perhaps relate this resistance to their lack of awareness of the importance of gender, body politics, male dominance, and sexism, and the artist's responsibility to critically reflect upon these issues. This sort of attitude is gradually changing thanks to a steady stream of Western literature that flows into Moscow. A specific example of such a change was the organization of the first feminist art exhibition in Moscow at the Oktiabrskaya Exhibition Hall in September 1990. The show's participants were Anna Al'chuk, Elena Elagina, Mariia Konstantinova, Vera Miturich-Khlebnikova, Irina Nakhova, Sabina Haensgen, and Elena Shakhovskaia (figs. 6.3, 2.36).² In this exhibition, titled "Female Worker [Rabotnitsa]" the artists engaged in a subversive reexamination of the ways women are represented officially and privately in codes, signs, and visual stereotypes throughout the culture.³ One should also mention two other exhibitions of women's art: "Visitation," of March 1991, and "Hearts of the Four [Serdtsa cheterekh]," which took place in the summer of 1992. Rather than attempting to analyze gender politics, these events were more playful in nature. For example, the male curator and some male artists decided to participate in "Visitation" under female surnames, thus confusing and diminishing the issues of feminism.⁴

Earlier, I cited examples of utopian androgynes in the art of the 1920s and 1930s. But even today, the specter of androgyny continues to captivate the imagination of artists seeking a way out of the blind alley of identification. In this respect, one of Nesterova's 1991 works, which depicts an angel with many eyes on his wings, is most revealing. Anyone familiar with the idea of the Annunciation, or who has seen paintings with that title in museums, knows that the immaculate conception was the result of verbal intervention: the wordless vision was fertilized by the invisible word filled with divine revelation. Any interpretation of the Annunciation in the context of the dichotomy of male and female leads to the feminization of a number of concepts, including that of "nonverbal vision."⁵ As a result, visibility becomes a surrogate for virginity (a.k.a., verbal "innocence," the condition of the feminine consciousness before its marriage to the masculine word). The subordination of seeing to speaking is precisely what Nesterova decisively repudiates in this work. Her wing-eyed divinity is a symbiosis of speech and vision, of the masculine and feminine principles united in one being: an angel or an androgyne.

Of all the female artists who began to work in the 1950s (the "feminist precursors"), Lidiia Masterkova occupies the most significant place. The mention of her name brings to mind paintings with circles ("planets") and ciphers, subordinated to musical rhythms. For the most part, these ciphers are either zeros and ones or nines. These numeric spacings bear witness



6.3
Elena Elagina, *Beautiful*, 1989.

to maximalism and an uncompromising quality that excludes any reconciliation with the idea of an “arithmetic mean” (fig. 6.4). Masterkova’s first abstractions were distinguished by the passion of their organic forms and their colorful colliding surfaces. Later, she began to glue old bits of lace and fragments of ecclesiastical attire (chasubles and the like) to the surfaces of her canvases (see fig. 2.2). The purpose of these brocade fabrics, reminiscent of the vestments of orthodox priests, was to identify socially non-engaged creation with religious asceticism. This use of lace and brocades (which in the context of those years may be considered the antithesis of the “masculine” relation to *faktura* [texture] and to the “politics” of material selection) placed the artist in an isolated position in the patriarchal world of Muscovite alternative art.

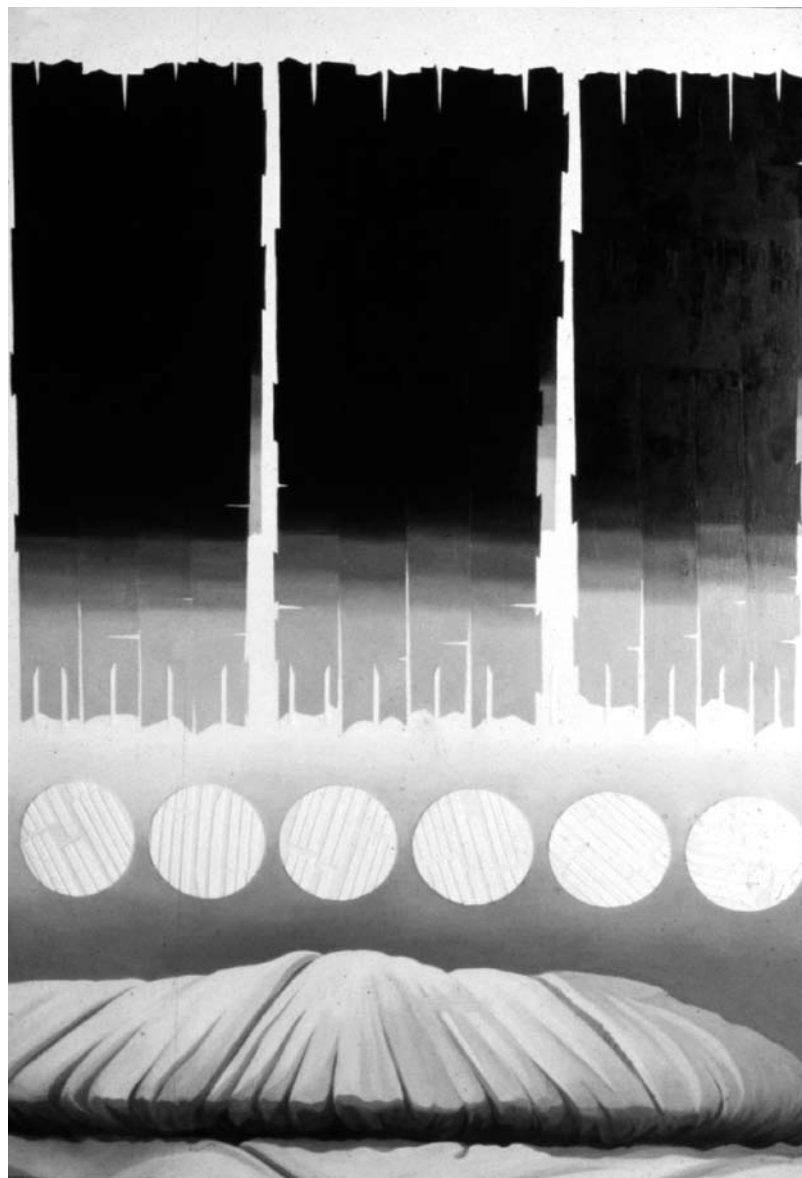
Generally speaking, however, the notions of being one of the “chosen” and of having a spiritual mission (ideas that were common in Masterkova’s texts of this period) were not alien to other representatives of “dissident modernism” (i.e., unofficial art of the 1960s and early 1970s). But with a younger generation of female artists, this kind of heroic individualism (inspired by supernatural forces or associated with Zarathustrian—read male—attitudes to cultural production) was destined to meet its Waterloo.

Among those who represent the “younger generation” of female artists are Elagina, Konstantinova, Kopystianskaia, and Nakhova. Elagina aims to reveal the presence of masculinity in what is institutionally defined as the successful woman, thereby demythologizing the Soviet version of a “phallic mother.” Among such figures is the writer E. Novikova-Vashentseva, a sixty-year-old peasant woman, whose consciousness was transformed after her husband hit her on the head with a log. Elagina’s reading of this story is the premise of her 1994 installation in the exhibition “Damaged Utopia.”⁶ A portrait of Novikova-Vashentseva was placed in a massive wooden frame—a hybrid between a part of an iconostasis and the window molding of a Russian cabin. Inside the frame a birch log rested on an altar. In a 1995 interview, Elagina pointed out, “as a whole, the installation represents a Temple of the Great Utopia, decorated with a number of appropriations. The dominant material is wood, reflecting the fact that images are perceived through an old peasant woman’s consciousness fertilized by the blow of the log; it is also a symbol of the element of fire, a hypostasis of sunlight.”⁷

Elagina often collaborates (in the tradition of the Russian avant-garde couples) with her husband, Igor’ Makarevich, who is equally interested in juxtaposing “creationist” myths with their “doublets,” such as—for example—the story of Pinocchio. In this sense, Makarevich and Elagina’s

6.4

Lidiia Masterkova, *Composition with a Parachute*, 1981.



method in art is the method of Gepetto, who picks up a log—an *eidos*, as it were—and uses it to create a wooden puppet, endowed with a striking vitality and a taste for adventure. Gepetto deserves mention also because he is a folklore double of Professor Henry Higgins in George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*. The difference is that Gepetto breathes a soul into an object (the log) by giving it freedom of choice, while Higgins, who deals with a "living thing" (notably a woman), tries to objectify her and bring her into an eidetic state. If Gepetto appears to us the way God could have been, Higgins (i.e., *Pygmalion*) is above all an artist. Artist as God. And "the creator." That is how male artists are commonly designated in Russian publications that have no relation to religion or eschatological discourse.⁸

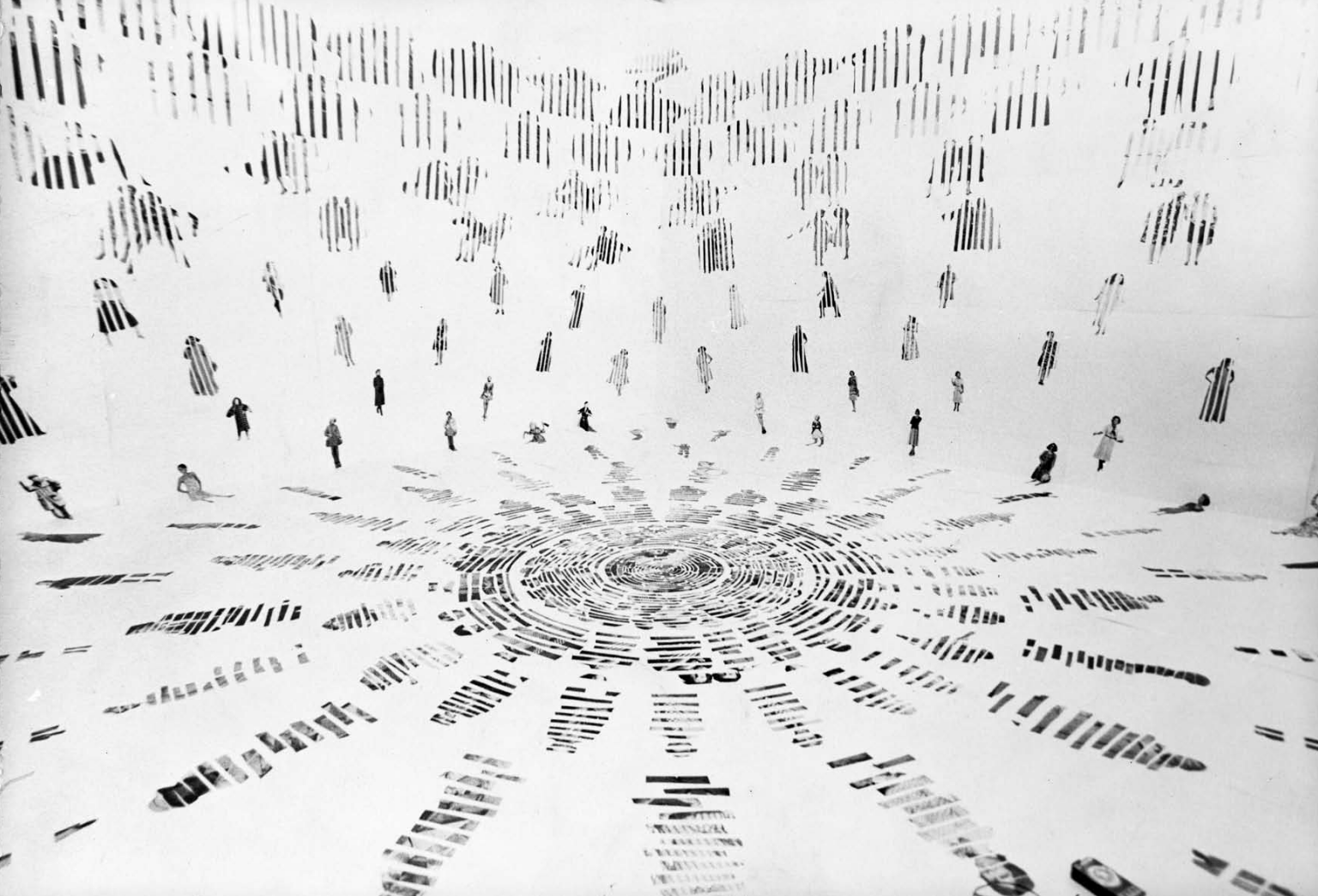
Kopystianskaia's method is to "lay on" texts from classical literature, domestic and foreign, in various configurations, on canvases primed with oil (fig. 6.5). Given that all the texts she chooses have been written by men, Kopystianskaia's paintings and installations suggest an exemplary submissiveness, even an admiration, which some (if not all) men of letters expect from their readers and/or students. But the subversive nature of this submissiveness reveals itself in the distortion of the primary text. "I write and then crumple up," says the artist. And yet when asked if the ways in which she crumples her canvases had anything to do with the libidinal, she ardently denied it. According to Kopystianskaia, "all our Russian art has a literary basis. With many painters an illustrative type of artistic thinking dominates. Therefore, when I make a landscape out of words or letters, I want to unite, or, conversely, separate the figurative language from the literary, that is, create the illusion that we are reading a book figuratively depicted, create the illusion of combination."⁹ Although Kopystianskaia agrees that "in Russia women artists face problems," she thinks that "it is not within [her] power to resolve it."¹⁰

In 1983, Nakhova began to combine the architectural background of residential space (that is, her Moscow apartment) with painterly, graphic, and sculptural elements (fig. 6.6). This installation genre, known by the name "room as a medium," is associated in the West with Günter Förg, Gerhard Merz, and Reinhard Mucha. At the same time, Nakhova became interested in reflecting in her paintings the features of a post-catastrophic consciousness: ruins, fragments of bygone cultures, and uninhabited spaces. Unsuitable for ecologists, these works are nonetheless endowed with a sense of peace and harmony.

In 1992, at Phyllis Kind Gallery in New York, the artist showed her sculptural reliefs made from a kind of petrified foam in an exhibition titled "Momentum Mortis." While working on the project, Nakhova had to wear a gas mask and protective clothes, as the technique uses chemicals



6.5
Svetlana Kopystianskaia,
Landscape, 1988.



6.6

Irina Nakhova, *Room no. 1*, 1983,
artist's apartment, Moscow.



6.7

Installation view, "After Perestroika:
Kitchenmaids or Stateswomen," Centre
International d'Art Contemporain
de Montréal, Montreal, Canada, 1993.

with carcinogenic components. The installation site was reminiscent of a volcanic eruption that captured people at the moment of death along with their household objects and artifacts. Apparently, the viewer was expected to become not only a witness to but a fellow sufferer of a sudden, catastrophic event. A “funeral” procession of large photographs depicting dust, withered grass, burnt remains, and ashes led to the downstairs gallery where the images of a dozen mythological dignitaries were stamped on the stretched canvases of cots (fig. 6.7). A videotape of the gallery’s previous opening (incidentally, of a show by a male artist) played on the monitors and suggested that the viewers of the preceding show could have been among those subjected to *Momentum Mortis*.

The apocalyptic theatricality of Nakhova’s project, combined with its pseudophallic ambitions, served, in a way, as a paradigm of false identity, an anasemic rule capable of both simulating and undermining the sense of compliance with the codes of patriarchal creativity.¹¹ The word “apocalypse” suggests the possibility of an archaeological dig with the aim of exhuming the nymph Calypso from the depths of her crypt. Due to this possibility, apocalyptic metaphors (or, rather “cryptaphors”), especially when employed by women, acquire a new transgressive meaning. But if “Calypso” is chiefly a “pleasure word,” her allosemic double, Circe, represents a hysterogenic agency of the same crypt.¹² For, as one can imagine, finding oneself turned into, or rather exposed as, a pig (most likely, a male chauvinist one) was truly apocalyptic for each of Ulysses’ companions, whereas for Circe it could have been just a figure of deconstruction.

Unlike other artistic communities in urban Russia, St. Petersburg’s is characterized by a progressive attitude and openness to issues that Muscovites usually dismiss as being “too vulgar” and/or “overtly politicized.” Among these are the concerns of gender and feminism, which I have already touched upon. Another such factor is the visibly homosexual milieu of St. Petersburg’s art world (associated with Timur Novikov, Denis Egel’skii, Georgii Gur’ianov, and Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe).¹³ The heterosexual Muscovite art world has criticized art on the banks of Neva as not as “intellectually charged” as that of the Moscow neoconceptualists. If this were the case, it would definitely be a paradox, as in the West feminism and homosexuality are attended by high levels of discourse and theoretical study. Apparently, to be an alternative artist and at the same time a homosexual in Soviet or even post-Soviet Russia, to experience double otherness, is twice as difficult.

Besides being a product of upbringing and tradition, the way we identify with creativity, with creative inspiration, and its realizations also relates to the history of how the female image has been perceived. For

example, one of the curious characteristics of classical art is its flirtation with the allegory by the name of Muse. The Muse is not simply a mythical creature of the female gender, but is a position, a role, a vacancy to be filled. To a large degree, this association has to do with a shifting of lexical and behavioral stereotypes from the sphere of love affairs into the realm of artistic creativity. Even when it deals with nonfigurative subject matter, patriarchal literary or painterly thinking tends to relate to its *objet petit a* as though it were a woman, once again fitting this sublimated object of artistic desire into the framework of *Pygmalion*. For, until the hand of the master touches something “rooted in nature” or lacking in ability to express itself, this “something” (read: Eliza Doolittle) has no chance to overcome her stifling limitations.

Eliza’s new personality, a construct created by Professor Higgins, embodies his mentorial, erotic, and above all aesthetic aspirations; the transformed Eliza is a work of art upon which the grace of his authorship descends. Likewise, many contemporary artists would still Higgins-ize their fantasies and desires in relation to artistic production, including work in which the imagery used is neither anthropomorphic nor fetishistic. Unlike art, which, following Claude Lévi-Strauss, can be referred to as “cooked,” creativity is “raw.” Moreover, creativity exists under the condition of a permanent incompleteness identified with femininity. One should not forget that, when speculating about the “feminine nature” of creativity, we refer not to a “real” female identity but rather to its metaphor, which is constituted by (or at the request of) men. The scope of such metaphors is rather broad and includes Shakespeare’s Juliet as well as Sade’s Juliette.

Pushkin’s insistence that poetry has to be “slightly stupid” could be simultaneously interpreted as though it is being addressed to a woman. In this respect, it would be interesting to confront the sensibility held by the admirers of pure viscosity with the beliefs of those who attempt to “measure harmony with algebra” (as Pushkin wrote in “Mozart and Salieri”). To a degree, the reason for the growing dissatisfaction with art theory, or with politically charged art, can be explained by the inner working of our aesthetic unconscious, which is capable of shifting our zealous and protective attitude from a “beautiful” gender to the beautiful in general. Thus, the hostility of the patrons of “beautiful women” toward those who put her under intellectual scrutiny (i.e., take her more seriously than one “should”) is, at closer look, analogous to the confrontation between art theorists and the “empirical” critics (as I choose to call them). The empiricists argue that the theorists overcomplicate, contaminate, deride, and even prostitute the

very nature of artistic creation. They announce themselves to be the (body) guards of “true” art, which “resists rationalization.” In doing so, they claim the ownership of the referent, not on the level of discourse (as in the case of their opponents), but by means of discrediting the texts of their rivals, the theorists. “Do not complicate a woman, do not sacrifice her for your discourse”—such is the essence of their message.¹⁴ This sexist orthodoxy, to which the position of the empiricists seems to attest, is still quite popular among the “art lovers.”

In April 1997 I received a call from a female editor of the Moscow magazine *Pushkin*. Asked whether I had any texts for publication, I offered her an article about feminism. She replied: “No, thank you. We are not yet interested in this topic.” From Moscow artists and critics who visited the United States, I have heard overtly sarcastic tales about political correctness and feminists. The latter, they complained, go so far as to attack renowned specialists of antiquity in whose lectures male names prevail over female ones. From these stories, which I group in the genre of “male folklore about feminism,” one can form a general image of a hysterical female who does not know her place and who spoils everyone’s mood. But this is precisely how patriarchal consciousness presents those whose actions do not fit into the frames of defined (by this consciousness) behavioral or gender norms and stereotypes. Any attempt to explain that there are a variety of feminisms, which are often mutually exclusive, is received with distrust. “I wish I had your problems,” is a common answer to the question “What do you think about feminism?”¹⁵

Art historian Margarita Tupitsyn told me about a toast made by the director of the Soviet Bureau of Art Export, Mr. Rivkind, at the dinner for the opening of “The Great Utopia,” for which she was one of the curators. Raising his glass Rivkind said: “Here is how it all started. The men got together and conceived an idea. Then the girls came and fulfilled it.” A similar scenario is connected with a famous work by Vladimir Tatlin, “Letatlin.” This flying machine had been stored at the Museum of the Armed Forces and was delivered to the Guggenheim Museum, for exhibiting in “The Great Utopia,” by a general. When he arrived in his hotel in New York, the general discovered that the linen on his bed was pink as was the towel in the bathroom. On a side table near a minibar he found a bouquet of pink flowers. All this reduced the Soviet visitor to an unaccountable rage. He most likely thought that girls are supposed to sleep on pink linen and boys on blue. The military man’s masculine feelings were offended. As a result, one of the Guggenheim’s staff members was awakened by the angry

Russian in the middle of the night. “This is feminist sabotage,” the general screamed into the phone.

In the former USSR, women perceived of themselves as an integral part of what Antonin Artaud defined as a “body-without-organs.” This genderless blob is hardly receptive to social issues, and Stalin, who had forcibly communalized urban life in Russia, took full advantage of this fact. Any attempt on the part of women to examine their situation through the lens of feminism would have been regarded as a schism, or as anticom-munal behavior. Now, with the retreat of institutional communality, Russian women finally seem to have an opportunity to openly express themselves. But, in fact, their day-to-day reality is far more stressful now than it was before. Television commercials, for example, are saturated with sexual stereotypes and with “norms” of femininity considered suitable for the new political and financial patriarchy.¹⁶ These place incredible pressure on impoverished Russian women, forcing them to share spaces of desire with the excessively dressed-up oligarchs’ wives or American supermodels whom they frequently see on the screen.

In chapter 9 I discuss two states of cultural consciousness: the “adult” and the “infantile.” Since both of these concepts are applied to individuals who have reached the age of maturity, it would be appropriate to speak of infantilism—particularly in the context of Russia’s recent past—in terms of the narcissistic ego, and of adulthood in terms of the superego. There are also two additional entities: the “ideal ego” and the “oral mother,” who represents communal speech.¹⁷ An analogue of the latter is a certain “composite of the woman” that shows motherly feeling and tolerance toward male childishness and self-absorption. In Deleuze’s view, “the narcissistic ego . . . contemplates its image in the *ideal ego* through the agency of the oral mother. . . . The ego undertakes a mythical operation of *idealization*, in which the mother-image serves as a mirror to reflect and even produce the *ideal ego* as a narcissistic ideal of omnipotence.”¹⁸

To conclude the theme of “enslavement through the body,” I would like to return to Kulik’s photograph. In his catalogue essay, philosopher Mikhail Ryklin argues that “the woman in the photograph personifies Justice weighing the two heroes’ testicles to find out who is the greater sinner.” But as an allegory of fallen Justice, naked Themis is more likely to identify (“through the body”) with the Patriarchal than to alienate it by subjecting it to a feminist critique. In fact, Themis’s nakedness suggests that we are all equally naked before the fatherly eyes of the creator, and her kneeling position, readable as Eve’s confession that she is guiltier than

Adam, refers to the notion of ultimate identity, more archetypal than gender or than the hegemony of patriarchy. Such an orthodoxy, rife with stretching contextual frames to embrace apocalyptic discourse, makes it impossible to discuss social issues in secular terms. Perhaps one should never forget that there is a secret passage from apo-calypse to Calypso, and through her to Circe. These two faces of femininity are what the “new Russians” need time to adjust to.

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